

Unit 1: Political Systems, Regimes, and Governments

Unit 1 builds the vocabulary of comparative politics. It covers how political scientists make claims, the four core concepts of state, nation, regime, and government, how to classify democratic and authoritarian regimes, how countries democratize, where rulers get their authority, how power changes hands, federal and unitary systems, the bases of political legitimacy, and what keeps regimes stable.

AP Comparative Government and Politics

Political Systems, Regimes, and Governments

About 15 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the concepts stack. The state, nation, regime, and government distinctions are the foundation. Regime classification builds on them, and everything from democratization to legitimacy assumes you can tell a regime apart from a government. Exam questions often describe a scenario and ask you to classify it or to predict what follows from it.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the comparison tables to review the distinctions the exam tests most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. Political Systems, Regimes, and Governments is 18 to 27 percent of the AP Comparative Government and Politics exam, the second-heaviest unit. It carries more weight than that number suggests, because regime type is the lens for every later unit. If you cannot classify a regime, you cannot analyze its institutions.

1.1 The Practice of Political Scientists

Political scientists make two kinds of statements. An **empirical statement** is a claim about what is, and it can be tested with evidence. "Voter turnout is higher in countries with compulsory voting" is empirical because data could confirm or refute it. A **normative statement** is a claim about what ought to be. "Every country should require voting" is normative because no dataset can prove a should. The exam will hand you a sentence and ask which kind it is, so look for testability.

Political scientists also distinguish **correlation** from **causation**. Correlation means two things move together. Causation means one produces the other. A correlation can suggest a cause, but it cannot establish one. Two variables can move together because a third factor drives both, because the direction runs the other way, or by coincidence. On the exam, never choose an answer that claims a proven cause from a mere pattern.

Trap. The classic wrong option upgrades a correlation into a cause. If a question says education levels and voter turnout rise together and asks what you can conclude, the answer is only that the two are related. Any option that says one causes the other has gone further than the evidence allows.

1.2 Defining Political Organizations

Four concepts, four different things. A **state** is a political unit that holds sovereignty over a defined territory and a population. Nigeria is a state. A **nation** is a group of people who share a common identity, usually built on language, culture, or history. The Yoruba are a nation inside the Nigerian state. A **regime** is the set of fundamental rules that determines who governs and how power is exercised. China's one-party rule is a regime. A **government** is the particular set of people currently running the state. The administration chosen in Mexico's most recent presidential election is a government.

The lifetime test separates them. Governments change at elections. Regimes change only when the rules of the game change, as in Iran in 1979 or Mexico in 2000. States persist through both, and nations exist whether or not they have a state of their own.

Trap. This is the number one confusion in the unit. If the question is about who holds office right now, it is the government. If it is about the rules that decide who can hold office at all, it is the regime. If it is about sovereignty over territory, it is the state. If it is about a shared identity, it is the nation. Match the question to the right word before you look at the options.

CONCEPT	DEFINITION	COURSE EXAMPLE
State	A political unit holding sovereignty over a defined territory and population.	Nigeria.
Nation	A group of people sharing a common identity of language, culture, or history.	The Yoruba within Nigeria.
Regime	The fundamental rules determining who governs and how power is exercised.	China's one-party rule.
Government	The particular individuals currently running the state.	Mexico's current presidential administration.

1.3 Democracy vs. Authoritarianism

A **procedural democracy** holds the procedures of democracy. Elections are free and fair, the vote is real, and the opposition can actually win. A **substantive democracy** adds the substance. Rights are protected, the rule of law binds the government, and civil liberties survive between elections. A country can meet the procedural standard while falling short on the substantive one, which is why the exam tests both.

Authoritarian regimes keep power without real competition. An **illiberal democracy**, also called electoral authoritarianism, holds elections but manages them so the opposition cannot realistically win. Russia fits here. A **one-party authoritarian** state does not allow opposition at all. China fits here. A **theocratic authoritarian** regime puts religious authority above elected institutions. Iran fits here, with the Supreme Leader holding ultimate authority and the Guardian Council vetting every candidate for president, the Majles, and the Assembly of Experts.

Trap. If a question gives you a country with clean elections but a government that jails journalists, the answer is procedurally democratic and substantively weak. Do not let the word "elections" decide the question by itself. Ask what happens after the votes are counted.

COUNTRY	REGIME TYPE	WHY
United Kingdom	Democratic	Parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy. Free elections and an elected House of Commons.
Mexico	Democratic	Federal presidential democracy. The opposition won the presidency in 2000.
Nigeria	Democratic, with deficits	Federal presidential democracy with regular multiparty elections alongside weaker institutions.
China	One-party authoritarian	CCP monopoly on power. No competitive elections.
Russia	Illiberal / electoral authoritarian	Elections exist, but genuine opposition is marginalized under a dominant presidency.
Iran	Theocratic authoritarian	The Supreme Leader holds ultimate authority. The Guardian Council vets all candidates.

1.4 Democratization

Democratization is a transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. The course gives you two cases, and you should know both cold. In Mexico, the PRI lost the presidency in 2000, the first opposition victory after decades of one-party dominance. The change came through elections and electoral reform, from inside the system. In Nigeria, civilian rule returned in 1999, ending a long period of military government. The change came from the military stepping back and elected institutions being restored.

Both cases show that democratization is a change of **regime**, not just a change of government. In 2000 Mexico did not just get a new president. It got a system in which the opposition could win and the ruling party could lose. In 1999 Nigeria did not just get a new leader. It got civilian rule back after military rule.

Trap. Democratization changes the regime. **Liberalization** loosens authoritarian control without changing the regime, such as allowing a freer press or tolerating limited opposition while the ruler keeps power. Liberalization can lead to democratization, but it can also stop halfway or reverse. If the ruling party still cannot lose, it is liberalization, not democratization.

COUNTRY	YEAR	WHAT CHANGED
Mexico	2000	The PRI lost the presidency in the first opposition victory, ending decades of one-party dominance. Electoral reform opened the system from inside.
Nigeria	1999	Civilian rule returned, ending military government. Elected institutions were restored.

1.5 Sources of Power and Authority

Rulers hold power through three sources. **Force** is coercion, the military and police power that makes people obey because they fear the consequences. **Persuasion** is the shaping of beliefs, through ideology, nationalist appeals, or propaganda, that makes people support the ruler willingly. **Legitimacy** is the belief among the governed that the ruler has the right to rule. Of the three, legitimacy is the cheapest to maintain and the hardest to build, because it runs on consent rather than on soldiers or slogans.

Most regimes mix all three, and the mix tells you what kind of regime you are looking at. A regime that leans on force is usually short on legitimacy. A regime rich in legitimacy can survive bad news that would sink a regime running on force alone.

1.6 Change in Power and Authority

Power changes hands by three routes. A **coup** is a sudden seizure of power, usually by the military or by insiders in the state apparatus. A **revolution** is a broad, usually violent overturn of the existing order by mass mobilization. **Reform** is gradual, legal change from inside the system. Coups and revolutions change the regime suddenly. Reform changes it slowly, and sometimes reform goes far enough to count as democratization.

Trap. If the question says the military seized power overnight, that is a coup. If it says mass mobilization overthrew the old order, that is a revolution. Nigeria's military governments came by coup. Iran's 1979 change was a revolution. Watch for an option that calls a sudden military takeover a revolution.

COUNTRY	ROUTE OF CHANGE	WHAT HAPPENED
Iran	Revolution	The 1979 revolution created the Islamic Republic and its theocratic constitution.
Nigeria	End of military rule	The return to civilian rule in 1999 ended military government.
Mexico	Reform leading to democratization	Electoral reforms opened the system. The opposition won the presidency in 2000.
United Kingdom	Incremental reform	Devolution transferred powers to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland inside a unitary state.
Russia	Change within the regime	A 2008 constitutional amendment extended presidential terms from four to six years, without changing the authoritarian regime.
China	Regime continuity	The party-state endured. A 2018 amendment removed presidential term limits, a change inside the regime rather than of it.

1.7 Federal and Unitary Systems

A **federal system** divides power between the national government and regional governments in a way neither level can change on its own. The division is protected, usually by a constitution. Mexico has 31 states plus Mexico City. Nigeria has 36 states plus the Federal Capital Territory. Russia's regions are represented in the Federation Council. A **unitary system** concentrates power at the national level. Regional governments may exist, but they hold only the power the center gives them, and the center can take it back. China and Iran are unitary.

The United Kingdom is the case the exam loves. It is unitary **with devolution**, not federal. Scotland has its own Parliament, Wales has the Senedd, and Northern Ireland has its Assembly, but Parliament at Westminster keeps ultimate legal authority and could revoke those powers. Devolution is a gift of power. Federalism is a guarantee of power.

Trap. If a question asks whether devolution makes the UK federal, the answer is no. Federalism protects regional power in the constitution so the center cannot remove it. Devolution hands regional power down inside a unitary state, and the center keeps the legal right to take it back. The test is not whether regions have power. It is whether the center can revoke it.

SYSTEM	COUNTRIES	KEY DETAIL
Federal	Russia, Mexico, Nigeria	Power is divided between national and regional governments and protected, usually by a constitution.
Unitary	China, Iran	Power is concentrated at the national level. The center can take back what it grants.
Unitary with devolution	United Kingdom	Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland hold devolved powers that Westminster could legally revoke. Not federalism.

1.8 Political Legitimacy

Legitimacy is the belief among the governed that a ruler has the right to rule, and it comes in four bases. **Traditional legitimacy** rests on long-standing custom or religious authority. Iran's Supreme Leader draws traditional legitimacy from religious authority, and the UK monarchy draws it from centuries of custom, even though the monarch's role is ceremonial. **Charismatic legitimacy** rests on the personal appeal of an individual leader. **Rational-legal legitimacy** rests on constitutions, laws, and procedures. The UK's parliamentary rules, Mexico's 1917 Constitution, and regular elections in the UK, Mexico, and Nigeria all supply rational-legal legitimacy. **Performance-based legitimacy** rests on results, above all economic results. China's economic growth under its state-directed market economy is the course's clearest example.

BASIS	WHAT IT RESTS ON	COURSE EXAMPLE
Traditional	Long-standing custom or religious authority.	Iran's Supreme Leader and his religious authority. The UK monarchy, ceremonial but centuries old.
Charismatic	The personal appeal of an individual leader.	A leader who commands loyalty by personality rather than by office.
Rational-legal	Constitutions, laws, and procedures.	The UK's parliamentary system. Mexico's 1917 Constitution. Regular elections in the UK, Mexico, and Nigeria.
Performance-based	Delivering results, especially economic ones.	China's economic growth.

Regimes usually claim more than one basis. Iran combines religious traditional legitimacy with elected institutions that add a rational-legal claim. The UK combines a ceremonial traditional monarchy with parliamentary rational-legal legitimacy. When one basis weakens, a regime leans harder on the others, and when all of them fail at once, the regime is in trouble.

1.9 Sustaining Legitimacy

Winning legitimacy and keeping it are different jobs. Democratic regimes sustain legitimacy through regular elections, constitutional limits, and the rule of law. Mexico's **sexenio**, a single six-year presidential term with no reelection ever under Article 83 of the 1917 Constitution, is a limit designed to prevent the return of one-man rule. Authoritarian regimes sustain legitimacy differently. Russia manages elections through a dominant-party system that keeps United Russia on top. China points to economic performance. Iran points to religious authority, with the Guardian Council vetting candidates to keep the system theocratic.

When legitimacy fails, compliance fails with it. Mexico's PRI lost legitimacy after decades of dominance, and the opposition won in 2000. Nigeria's military government lost legitimacy, and civilian rule returned in 1999. A regime that cannot justify its rule eventually cannot enforce it either, and the exam often asks you to trace that chain from a legitimacy crisis to a regime change.

1.10 Political Stability

Stability is a regime's ability to survive shocks without breaking. Four factors matter most. Legitimacy keeps people obeying without constant force. Economic performance keeps daily life tolerable. Strong institutions channel conflict into rules instead of violence. And the management of social **cleavages** keeps deep divisions from becoming open conflict.

Compare the cases. The UK is stable, with long institutional continuity behind its parliamentary system. China is stable, with an unbroken party-state and performance-based legitimacy from economic growth. Nigeria is the fragile case. It carries deep ethnic and religious cleavages among the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, an oil-dependent economy, and a history of military government that civilian rule has only held since 1999. Mexico sits between them, stable since its 2000 democratization, with constitutional rules like the sexenio guarding against backsliding.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
State vs nation vs regime vs government	State is sovereignty over territory. Nation is a shared identity. Regime is the rules of the game. Government is the people in office now.
Procedural vs substantive democracy	Procedures are elections and competition. Substance is rights and the rule of law. Elections alone prove only the first.
Devolution vs federalism	Devolution is revocable power inside a unitary state, as in the UK. Federalism is constitutionally protected regional power, as in Mexico, Nigeria, and Russia.
Democratization vs liberalization	Democratization changes the regime, as in Mexico 2000 and Nigeria 1999. Liberalization loosens control without changing the regime.
Empirical vs normative	Empirical claims are testable claims about what is. Normative claims are claims about what ought to be.
Correlation vs causation	Two things moving together is not one causing the other. A pattern is not a proof.
Coup vs revolution	A coup is a sudden insider or military seizure of power. A revolution is a mass overturn of the existing order.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

1. Which of the following best describes a nation?

1. A group of people who share a common cultural identity, such as language or history
2. A sovereign political unit controlling a defined territory
3. The set of fundamental rules determining how a country is governed
4. The particular individuals currently holding office

2. In 2000, the PRI lost the presidency of Mexico for the first time. This event is best classified as an example of

1. liberalization without regime change
2. democratization
3. a military coup
4. decolonization

3. Which of the following countries is best classified as an illiberal or electoral authoritarian regime?

1. United Kingdom
2. Nigeria
3. Russia
4. Mexico

4. The United Kingdom grants lawmaking power to the Scottish Parliament, yet Parliament at Westminster retains the legal right to take that power back. This arrangement best illustrates

1. federalism, because power is divided between two levels of government
2. confederalism, because the regions hold ultimate sovereignty
3. the end of constitutional monarchy in the United Kingdom
4. devolution within a unitary state

5. A political scientist writes that countries with higher levels of education tend to have higher voter turnout. This statement is best described as

1. empirical, because it makes a testable claim about what is
2. normative, because it prescribes what governments should do
3. causal, because it proves that education causes higher turnout
4. anecdotal, because it relies on a single observation

6. Which of the following best explains why Iran is described as a theocratic authoritarian regime?

1. It holds no elections of any kind
2. Its Supreme Leader holds lifetime tenure and ultimate authority over the military, judiciary, and media, and the Guardian Council vets all candidates
3. It has a unicameral legislature
4. It is a federal system with powerful regional governments

7. Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999. Which of the following most directly describes the change of regime type in Nigeria?

1. A constitutional amendment extending presidential terms
2. The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta
3. The end of military government and the restoration of elected civilian institutions
4. The adoption of a theocratic constitution

8. Which of the following is an example of rational-legal legitimacy?

1. A population accepts a ruler because of the ruler's religious authority
2. A population accepts a ruler because of the ruler's personal charisma
3. A population accepts a ruler because of strong economic growth
4. A population accepts a ruler because the ruler was chosen through constitutional procedures and regular elections

Answer Key

- 1. A.** A nation is a group of people sharing a common identity of language, culture, or history. B describes a state, which holds sovereignty over territory. C describes a regime, the fundamental rules of who governs. D describes a government, the individuals currently in office.
- 2. B.** The 2000 election ended decades of one-party dominance and transferred power to the opposition, which is a change of regime and therefore democratization. A is wrong because the regime did change, so this was not liberalization without regime change. C is wrong because the transition was electoral, not a military seizure. D is wrong because Mexico was not a colony in 2000.
- 3. C.** Russia holds elections, but genuine opposition is marginalized under a dominant presidency, which is the definition of illiberal or electoral authoritarianism. A is wrong because the UK is a parliamentary democracy. B is wrong because Nigeria is democratic, with deficits, and holds real multiparty elections. D is wrong because Mexico is a federal presidential democracy.
- 4. D.** The UK is unitary with devolution. Regional bodies hold power that Westminster can legally take back, which is exactly what this arrangement shows. A is the central trap. Devolution is not federalism, because the division of power is not constitutionally protected. B is wrong because sovereignty stays at Westminster. C is wrong because the UK remains a constitutional monarchy.
- 5. A.** The statement claims something about what is, and it can be tested with data, which makes it empirical. B confuses empirical with normative. Nothing in the sentence says what ought to be. C upgrades a correlation into a cause. The statement shows the two move together, not that one produces the other. D misreads a general pattern claim as a single observation.
- 6. B.** Lifetime tenure and ultimate authority for the Supreme Leader, combined with the Guardian Council vetting all candidates, is what makes the regime both theocratic and authoritarian. A is wrong because Iran does hold elections for president, the Majles, and the Assembly of Experts, though candidates are vetted. C is true but insufficient. A unicameral legislature alone does not make a regime theocratic. D is wrong because Iran is unitary.
- 7. C.** The 1999 transition ended military government and restored elected civilian institutions, which is a change of regime type. A describes changes like Russia's 2008 term extension, not Nigeria. B is true about Nigeria's oil-dependent economy but is not the mechanism of the regime change. D describes Iran, not Nigeria.
- 8. D.** Accepting a ruler because constitutional procedures and regular elections chose them is rational-legal legitimacy. A is traditional legitimacy, like the religious authority of Iran's Supreme Leader. B is charismatic legitimacy. C is performance-based legitimacy, like China's economic growth.

When you check your answers, note which distinction each miss came from. Make a flashcard for that distinction and drill it spaced out over the next few days instead of rereading the whole section. If you missed one of these questions, the same distinction is worth practicing again in Rycal, where the Political Systems, Regimes, and Governments deck has flashcards for it and more practice questions use the same kinds of traps.

One-Page Recall Check

Say each answer out loud before you look back, and mark the ones you cannot finish. Anything you cannot say out loud yet belongs in your flashcard deck. In Rycal, add those items to the Political Systems, Regimes, and Governments deck and let spaced review bring them back over the next few days.

- Define an empirical statement and a normative statement, and give one example of each.
- Explain why a correlation does not establish causation.
- Define state, nation, regime, and government, and give a course-country example of each.
- Explain the difference between procedural and substantive democracy.
- Classify all six course countries by regime type and justify each classification.
- Describe Mexico's 2000 and Nigeria's 1999 democratizations and explain how each changed the regime, not just the government.
- Explain the difference between democratization and liberalization.
- Name the three sources of power and authority and explain why legitimacy is the most durable of the three.
- Define coup, revolution, and reform, and match each course country to its route of change.
- Explain the difference between a federal and a unitary system, and explain why UK devolution is not federalism.
- Name the four bases of legitimacy and give a course-country example of each.
- Explain how democratic and authoritarian regimes sustain legitimacy, using two course examples.
- Name four factors that support political stability and apply them to one stable and one fragile course country.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the Political Systems, Regimes, and Governments deck under AP Comparative Government and Politics. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

Empirical statement, Normative statement, Correlation, Causation, State, Nation, Regime, Government, Procedural democracy, Substantive democracy, Illiberal democracy, Electoral authoritarianism, Democratization, Liberalization, Force, Persuasion, Legitimacy, Coup, Revolution, Reform, Federal system, Unitary system, Devolution, Traditional legitimacy, Charismatic legitimacy, Rational-legal legitimacy, Performance-based legitimacy, Political stability.

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